

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 12, 2010

The following letter was sent the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton January 14, 2010:

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State Washington, DC 20520

Dear Madame Secretary;

We write today to respectfully urge that U.S. representatives to the United Nations office in Geneva raise tough and incisive questions about violations of religious freedom and related human rights in Iran, Iraq, and Egypt during the seventh session of the United Nations Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) scheduled for February 2010. The United States also should ensure that these issues are included in the recommendations that result from the UPR. The UPR forum provides a unique opportunity to shine a light on the egregious violations in these countries and to encourage these nations' governments to comply with international norms.

USCIRF has long focused on the status of religious freedom and related human rights in Iran, Iraq, and Egypt. We have recommended that both Iran and Iraq be designated as "countries of particular concern" (CPCs) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for their governments' perpetration or toleration of systematic, ongoing, egregious religious freedom violations. Since 2002, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has placed Egypt on our Watch List because conditions in that country require close monitoring due

to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom perpetrated or tolerated by the government.

Iran: The U.S. State Department has designated Iran as a CPC since 1999. The government of Iran continues to systematically and egregiously violate religious freedom, and has engaged in prolonged detention, torture, and executions of its citizens based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. Over the past few years, and especially after the contested June 2009 Presidential election, the government has imposed harsh prison sentences on prominent reformers from the Shi'a majority community, many of whom have been tried on trumped-up criminal charges of "insulting Islam," criticizing the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials that deviate from Islamic standards. This systematic repression extends to religious minorities, particularly Baha'is, as well as Sufi Muslims, Jews, and Evangelical Christians. Members of those minority groups that are formally recognized (Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews) also face legal and other forms of discrimination. Because the Iranian authorities view members of the Baha'i community as heretics, many have been subjected to particularly severe religious freedom violations. Over 200 Baha'i leaders have been executed since 1979, and seven Baha'is recently were put on trial, after having been unjustly imprisoned for nearly two years and charged with "espionage for Israel," a crime punishable by death. Approximately 40 other Baha'is remain in prison solely because of their beliefs. The United States should question Iran during the UPR about these specific cases. In addition, during the past few years, arrests and harassment of Sufis increased significantly, with reports that the government is considering banning Sufism outright. Heightened anti-Semitism and repeated Holocaust denials by senior government officials continue to occur, despite UN resolutions condemning such practices. Christians in Iran, particularly Evangelical and other Protestants, as well as converts, are subject to harassment, kidnappings, arrests, close surveillance, and imprisonment. The Iranian government has taken steps in recent years toward passing a revised penal code that, in clear violation of Iran's international legal obligations, would codify serious punishments, including the death penalty, on converts from Islam.

Iraq: Despite security improvements, Iraqis from many religious communities, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, continue to suffer from targeted violence and intimidation, and those from the country's smallest minorities, including Chaldo-Assyrian and other Christians, Sabean Mandaean, and Yazidis, are especially vulnerable. For example, Christian churches were bombed as recently as December 23, 2009. The violence, forced displacement, discrimination, marginalization, and neglect suffered by members of these small minority groups has led many to flee the country, threatening these ancient communities' very existence in Iraq and jeopardizing Iraq's future as a diverse and free society. Given both the drawdown of American troops and the national elections scheduled for March 2010, it is particularly important to draw attention to the conditions necessary to ensure that all Iraqis, including religious minorities, can participate in elections that are safe, fair and free of intimidation and violence, and to make

certain that the new government fully guarantees religious freedom.

Egypt: In Egypt, serious problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations remain widespread against members of religious minorities, as well as non-conforming Muslims. The government has used charges of blaspheming or insulting Islam to imprison purportedly “unorthodox” Muslims and individuals, including bloggers, who have called for political and religious reforms. At the same time, the government has done little to stop the repression of and discrimination against religious minorities, including indigenous Coptic Orthodox Christians and other small Christian groups. In many cases, no action is taken to punish those responsible for violence or other severe violations of religious freedom. There has been an upsurge of attacks by extremists targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians, most recently in early January in a small town in the Qena Province in Upper Egypt. The government also has not adequately responded to the pervasive and virulent anti-Semitism in the media under its control. Egypt’s Supreme Administrative Court in March 2009 dismissed final appeals to a 2008 lower court verdict overturning the ban on providing official identity documents to members of the Baha’i faith. However, to date only about a dozen Baha’is have received such documents.

Along with Iran, Iraq, and Egypt, the seventh session of the UPR process also will review the human rights record of Kazakhstan. Given that Kazakhstan currently chairs the 56-nation Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), it is incumbent to raise concerns about two articles in the current and draft Kazakh Administrative Codes. These articles would prescribe international standards on freedom of religion or belief with possible penalties for those who take part in, lead or finance an unregistered religious community or social organization as well as those who conduct unlicensed “missionary activity.” The Kazakh government should submit these articles for review by international experts, including at the United Nations and the OSCE, and should abide by their recommendations.

The UPR process offers a unique opportunity for U.S. representatives to ask hard questions of nations whose records on religious freedom and related human rights are profoundly troubling. We urge the United States to join other nations in raising these issues, thereby reaffirming that human rights remains a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy and that America will hold governments accountable for their actions.

Sincerely yours,  
Leonard Leo  
Chair

cc: The Honorable Susan Rice, Ambassador of the United States to the United Nations  
Douglas Griffiths, Charge'd' Affairs, a.i., U.S. Mission to the United Nations in  
Geneva  
Esther Brimmer, Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations  
Michael Posner, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Rights, and Labor  
Peter J. Kovach, Director, Office of International Religious Freedom